

Fortress*

YVONNE

Not a single ceiling or window fan
In our stifling apartment on the top floor.
Mother and I, forced out the front door.
Across the bricked-in street, dead-end,
An ice cream factory stared us down.
A lumber yard to the south—no way around.
We turned north, crossed Woodland's trolley track.
Escape cost a long up (and down) hill trek.

Through Clark Park's dappled green,
Past stony College of Pharmacy,
We were off to see the wizardry!
Spun in darkness, a movie-house screen
Could cool for an hour poverty's sting,
Make a vagabond, a king.
The far-fetched caught by a finger.
Like White Rabbit—no time to linger.

Past Baltimore trolley—Cedar, Larchwood, Pine
 Spruce, Locust, Walnut—a roll call—
 Spirits unfurled like prayers on a spool.
 Along these streets did wealth of another kind
 Shudder behind the sheerest heirloom curtain
 As Mother and I, strange shadows in pastel cotton,
 Far below peaked attics, Gothic spires, flat-tarred
 Rooftops, trudged on and upward?

At journey's end, at peak of Walnut Hill,
 Its electrifying name, *The Commodore*,
 Magnifying fame with nonsense, trash or treasure,
 Moorish in style, our refuge, welcomed all.
 Today, once upon a time is gone.
 No sign above the parapet. Just a skeleton
 Of steel. New dreams proclaim this edifice
 Now a mosque. Indeed, a fortress.

**420 Row, on the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places, is a collection of eight ornate homes on the west side of 42nd Street in University City. The three-story homes were designed and built by G.W. and W.D. Hewitt in the early 1880s, the first Queen Anne-style development in Spruce Hill.*